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Adequate Modes of Listening

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Music theorist Ola Stockfelt (1953–) writes on soundscapes, background music, and the history of musical listening. In this article, he shows that modern life requires us to cultivate a variety of modes of listening, no one of which has any inherent priority. Hence, Stockfelt challenges Theodor Adorno's notion (developed most explicitly in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*) that only a focused, expert listening is an adequate and properly critical one. Throughout the piece, Stockfelt invokes a central thesis of philosophical hermeneutics, arguing that different listening practices effectively recompose any given piece of music and, therefore, that the nature of the musical work is always in flux.

Towards evening, I am totally exhausted, but I can finally sink into the seat and relax. The roar of the engines and the hiss from the vents is almost deafening. Under normal circumstances, I detest those sounds, but now they give me the marvelous confirmation that I have made it—I have finally got past all those unexpected and absurd obstacles that forced me to run around and around, all day, in the heat, from office to office and from airport to airport, even though I had my reservation and was ready to depart in the morning. Between this buzz and the noise from fellow passengers, mad individual flute tones find their way to me, tones that further confirm my impression that I have finally reached a place where I can relax. It takes a few minutes before I can even muster the attention to listen to what is actually being played: it is the first movement of Mozart's Symphony no. 40, the "Great G-minor," in an arrangement for flute soloist and some kind of rock group. The flutist seems totally unengaged; as do the other musicians, when it is even possible to distinguish what they are playing. Moreover, the arranger has mutilated the movement quite brutally—large sections are simply absent. As long as I wasn't listening closely, it was perfect music for the situation, but now I start to be both irritated and interested—and not at all at home any more.

What does it mean to treat good music like that? [. . .]

Western industrialized nations today form a more or less homogeneous culture dominated musically by European and North American "art music" and Anglo-American popular music. Through the phonograph record, radio, and television, the same music is to a great extent scattered across the entire world.[1] Each hearing person who listens to the radio, watches TV, goes to the movies, goes dancing, eats in restaurants, goes to supermarkets, participates in parties, has built up, has been *forced* (in order to be able to handle her or his perceptions of sound)—to build up an appreciable competence in translating and using the music impressions that stream in from loudspeakers in almost every living space. Such competence results not primarily from any formalized schooling but from different everyday learning processes as we teach ourselves which of the sounds that ebb and surge across the modern cityscape at every instant of the day should be clustered together and understood as music and which should be understood as something else; which different types of music correlate with which activity and which subculture; which type of intramusical meanings attach to different types of sound in different musical contexts. The mass-media musical mainstream (in the widest sense of the phrase) has hence become something of a nonverbal lingua franca, one common cultural repertoire transcending traditional culture, class, and age boundaries.[2] Alongside this common cultural competence, many listeners also live in one or several more or less profiled subcultures with a more specialized musical language.[3]

At the same time, the same listeners have the competence to use the same type of music, even the same piece of music, in a variety of different ways in different situations. The symphony that in the concert hall or on earphones can give an autonomous intramusical experience, tuning one's mood to the highest tension and shutting out the rest of the world, may in the café give the same listeners a mildly pleasant, relaxed separation from the noise of the street. At the movies (like the use of Mozart's Symphony no. 40's first movement in a James Bond film)[4] or on television (like the main theme from the same movement in the introduction trailer for the 1987 world ice hockey championships in Vienna), parts of the same work may clearly designate the persons and environments shown according to categories of class and cultural status. And on the car radio in rush hour traffic (if the radio can't be shut off) the same music may constitute an annoying hazard to road safety.

In this way, the situation in which one encounters music conditions the music itself. Particularly with regard to music within the communal repertoire, one can even assume that daily listening is often *more conditioned by the situation in which one meets the music than by the music itself, or by the listener's primary cultural identity*, at least within that more or less homogeneous cultural sphere that comprises Western industrialized environments. Which mode of listening the listener adopts in a given situation depends mainly on how the listener chooses to listen—that is, which mode of listening he or she chooses to develop or adopt. And yet this choice is neither totally free nor accidental.

In part, every mode of listening demands a significant degree of competence on the part of the listener (and the competence will not be less by being shared by many), and no listener can have an infinite repertoire of modes of listening. The mode of listening a listener can adopt is in this way limited by the competences in modes of listening that he or she possesses or can develop in a given situation

[. . .] *In part,* not every mode of listening is in any immediate way adaptable to every type of sound structure or even to every type of musical work [. . .] *In part,* different modes of listening are in different ways more or less firmly connected to specific listening situations. For example, to dance during a symphony concert (practically impossible because of the fixed seats) is to commit a gaffe, a breach of social convention, even if one is hearing Viennese waltzes or other music originally meant to accompany dancing. It is likewise inappropriate to sink into prolonged intramusical contemplation when one is squeezed into a 7-11-type convenience store. *In part,* finally, the listener's choice of strategies is not entirely free. It can be impossible, for example, to choose to listen in an autonomously reflexive mode if too many other things are competing for attention, and impossible to refuse to listen—to dishearken—to very strong and profiled sounds, or to musemes with a special significance for the listener.[5] Different listeners are also conscious to different degrees of their own choice of mode of listening, and are moreover able to adapt a chosen mode of listening in different situations in relation to different types of sound structures [. . .]

Today, one can hear almost any style of music in any surrounding and in any situation. The sound of big opera ensembles can be fitted onto a windsurfing board, and the sound of a nylon-stringed guitar can fill a football stadium; one can listen to march music in the bathtub and salon music in the mountains. This state of affairs is still quite novel. Not that long ago, one was obliged to go to the opera to hear opera, and the only way to hear the guitar was to sit rather close to the performer. Various musical styles were implicitly bound to specific environments and specific relationships between the performer and the listener [. . .]

Each style of music, even if it can make an appearance almost anywhere today, is shaped in close relation to a few environments. In each genre, a few environments, a few situations of listening, make up the constitutive elements in this genre: "The distance between musician and audience, between spectator and spectator, the overall dimension of the events are often fundamental elements in the definition of a genre, and often guide the participants, in the right or wrong way in determining what they should expect about other rules of genre; often 'how you are seated' says more about the music that will be performed than a poster does."[6]

Such an environment can be concretely tangible, like a concert hall, a *palais de danse,* or a church; but it may also be more difficult to localize. Loudspeakers constitute a sort of musical environment, just as one can say that in certain contexts "radio offerings" in their own right constitute a musical environment—not as tangible as a church but not less real.

For recently produced works of music, the style-specific and genre-specific environments have often been identical. Music that is intended for performance in a concert hall has been produced for the concert hall situation. For music mainly targeted toward play on car stereos, one can, for instance, use small speakers that simulate car stereos during the mixing. For works of music that have existed for a longer time, however, the discrepancy can be considerable: this is the case, for example, when liturgical or predominantly dance music is performed in the concert hall for a seated public engaged in aesthetic contemplation. In these instances the changed situation of listening has meant greater or lesser changes in the work of music as sound and especially in the *perceived* work of music.[7]

For each musical genre, a number of listening situations in a given historical situation constitute the genre-specific relation between music and listener. These determine the genre-defining property and the ideal relation between music and listener that were presumed in the formation of the musical style—in the composing, the arranging, the performance, the programming of the music. I have chosen to call these *genre-normative listening situations.*

Genre-normative listening situations are not absolute but are perpetually changing in tandem with the changes in society, in the same way that musical styles change. The private music rooms of late eighteenth-century connoisseurs, for example, engendered a totally different relationship between the listener and the music from those attaining in the opera hall or concert hall, relationships that in their turn differed from those characteristic of the bourgeois salon and restaurant. These different situations hence demanded or made possible different types of musical performance (in spite of the fact that the works being performed might be identical on paper). The situations, and the different performances, also demanded or made possible different modes of listening, and hence resulted in different musical experiences.

Consequently, each genre also has a number of *genre-normative modes of listening,* and even these have changed over time in relationships corresponding to styles of music, to choices of strategies of the listener, to the genre-normative situations of listening, and to a series of social factors. The reflexive, active attitude of musicians to music is a mode of listening that is probably (to some extent) common to almost all forms of "music" (for instance, if one also counts electronic music composers as performing musicians). Other normative modes of listening, like the normative user situations, can almost become defining characteristics for other genres of music.

I have chosen to call each listening in a genre-normative listening situation with its situation-associated genre-normative mode of listening *adequate listening.* Adequate listening hence occurs when one listens to music according to the exigencies of a given social situation and according to the predominant sociocultural conventions of the subculture to which the music belongs.

As a rule, a genre comprises several types of adequate listening. The person who performs music listens with a different type of concentration than do people who are simply listening; but both types of listening can surely be adequate to the genre. Both those who are caught up in the music and dance wildly out on the floor and those who stand close to the stage and concentrate, admiring and studying the virtuosity of the solo guitarist, show adequate attitudes at a blues-rock concert; on the other hand, someone who leans back and with half-closed eyes tries to follow the tonal and thematic tension, relations, and dissolutions is probably not listening adequately.

To listen adequately hence does not mean any particular, better, or "more musical," "more intellectual," or "culturally superior" way of listening. It means that one masters and develops the ability to listen for what is relevant to the genre in the music, for what is adequate to understanding according to the specific genre's comprehensible context. Adequate listening is not a prerequisite of assimilating or enjoying music, of learning how to recognize musical styles, or how to create meaning for oneself from what music expresses; it *is* a prerequisite of using music as a language in a broader sense, as a medium for real communication from com-

poser, musician, or programmer to audience/listener. In live situations, an adequately listening audience may also be the prerequisite for the performers' ability to perform genre-adequate music in genres that build on reciprocal communication between executors and listeners. Adequate listening, with adequate modes of listening in an adequate situation, is a normative part of music genre, in the same way that sounding material is.

Adequate listening is, like all languages, always the result of an informal (although sometimes formalized) contract between a greater or smaller group of people, an agreement about the relation of the musical means of expression to this group's picture of the world. Adequate listening is hence always in the broadest sense ideological: it relates to a set of opinions belonging to a social group about ideal relations between individuals, between individuals and cultural expression, and between the cultural expressions and the construction of society [. . . .]

[A]utonomous reflexive listening is not the only adequate listening to develop and establish itself: people have listened adequately to different music in a number of different ways, even though not all these modes of listening were carried on in a formalized fashion into the present. There has never been only *one* adequate autonomous listening in existence—disagreement between different theoretical schools can be seen as oppositions between different autonomous adequacy ideals that can, perhaps by splitting hairs, be said to constitute different musical genres within the frame of one and the same musical style.

Analysis of a musical genre, or of a work in a musical genre, must contain and be based on analysis of the listening adequate to that genre, of the music as it is experienced as adequate to the genre in the normative listening situations, with an adequate mode of listening, adequate extramusical connotations, and adequate simultaneous activities—this is a prerequisite for the possibility of analyzing the "right" piece of music. However, for analyses of everyday music listening, this is not always enough. Analysis of music in everyday listening situations must be based on listening adequate to the given situation. Such adequacy is not determined by the music style in and of itself, or by the genre within which the music style was created, or by the genre to which it primarily belongs today, but rather by the location of the music in the specific situation. That location determines, for instance, who can fulfill the role of "transmitter" in "the musical communication chain." When analyzing background music that targets a general audience in a specific situation, one might therefore develop a strategy of making the music understandable as it is meant to be made understandable by the arranger and programmer. An analysis based on a one-sided, concentrated, autonomous listening will be an analysis of the wrong object, even if the music analyzed originally was created for such a mode of listening. This constraint naturally creates special methodological problems, inasmuch as an adequately adapted "background listening" makes continuous reflexive consciousness impossible. An analysis must therefore begin from such shifts between modes of listening, between foreground and background [. . . .]

Hence we must develop our competence reflexively to control the use of, and the shifts between, different modes of listening to different types of sound events. In the same way that we must listen to the urban soundscape as "music" in order to make it more human, thereby developing the competence to draw up active goals for the "composition" of a more human sound environment, we must

develop the competence to listen to that music precisely *as* a part of the soundscape in order to explain and change the position of the music in this soundscape. Insofar as we strive to understand today's everyday music and want to develop pedagogical programs with real relevance to those who will live and participate in this musical life, we must develop our own reflexive consciousness and competence as active "idle listeners."

NOTES

1. See Roger Wallis and Krister Malm, *Big Sounds from Small People: The Music Industry in Small Countries* (New York: Pendragon, 1984), and Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media in the World,* Communication and Society series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

2. Philip Tagg convincingly demonstrates both the common competence of adequately understanding and contextually placing different musical structures through the process of reflexive listening and the fact that listeners for the most part understand the musical semiotic content in such situations in the same way, across cultural areas in other ways considerably separated (Tagg and Clarida, unpublished report on listeners' responses to film and television title themes).

3. See Ulf Hannerz's discussion of "cultural repertoires" in Hannerz, "Research in the Black Ghetto: A Review of the Sixties," *Discovering Afro-America*, ed. Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed (Leiden: International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology, E. J. Brill, 1975), and Hannerz, "Delkulturerna och helheten" ("Subcultures and the Totality"), *Kultur och medvetande (Culture and Consciousness),* ed. Ulf Hannerz, Rita Liljeström, and Orvar Löfgren (Göteborg: Akademilitteratur, 1982).

4. *The Living Daylights*, 1988.

5. Minimal fragments of musical meaning. See Philip Tagg, *Kojak, 50 Seconds of Television Music—toward the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music* (Göteborg: Skrifter från Musikvetenskapliga institutionen vid Göteborgs Universitet No. 2, 1979)—Trans.

6. Franco Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications," *Popular Music Perspectives*, ed. David Horn and Philip Tagg (Göteborg and Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1981), 57.

7. One could even say that changes in the listening situation, and therefore in the modes of listening, have created totally new works of music—in cases where the sounding structure in the original context wasn't being perceived as music.